

APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

February 28, 2023

Allison Blake, CEO, Child and Family Agency of SECT

Good morning, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Berthel, Representative Nuccio and Members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Allison Blake and I am the Chief Executive Officer of Child and Family Agency of SECT. Child and Family Agency of Southeastern CT, Inc. (CFA) is a leading social service provider in southern and eastern Connecticut. Since its incorporation in 1972, CFA has grown to be a thriving organization providing a continuum of care to adults, children, and families in southern and eastern Connecticut. The Agency's programming includes: outpatient and in-home behavioral health services, medical services, child welfare programming, early childhood development centers and family resource services, and 13 School Based Health Centers located throughout New London County (Groton, New London, Stonington, and Waterford). We provide school expanded behavioral health services to several additional schools in the above towns as well as Ledyard. In FY 2022 we served 7,011 registered students through 5,109 medical visits and 8,367 behavioral health visits.

I come before you today to testify about H.B. No. 6659 (COMM) AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2025 AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR.)

Every child deserves a chance to be healthy and to reach their full potential in life, but many children have health problems that make it difficult for them to learn and succeed. We all want young people in Connecticut to be healthy and thriving. School-based health centers play a vital role in helping young people with their medical, mental health and oral health concerns. Healthy kids make better learners.

We believe it is important for you to understand the actual impact of SBHC's in our communities. Here are some examples of our work that demonstrate the value of these critical services and supports to Connecticut's children and youth.

One middle school clinician recently had a student in New London whose family was not going to be able to afford the payments for mental health services at our outpatient clinic as they were uninsured and undocumented. Our staff at the clinic connected with this family to the SBHC at the children's school and they are now receiving necessary services.

An elementary school clinician has a family in New London who were reluctant to engage in SBHC services as they were struggling to feel supported by the school given their child's behaviors and statements. The clinician was able to work with the family to educate them on mental health and the benefits of therapy for their child and bridged the communication and support with the school. The family is now actively engaged in treatment for their child and recently reported feeling supported by the school after our SBHC clinician attended a 504 meeting for their child. The clinician worked with the school and the family to help develop accommodations that support the child's educational plan and mental health needs.

Last year, an elementary school clinician had a student transferred to her from the outpatient clinic with school phobia in an effort to increase school supports and school attendance. This student increased school attendance and transitioned to middle school this school year. She was able to be transferred to SBHC at the middle school and is about to discharge successfully with amazing attendance.

In another case, the SBHC staff recently partnered with the Nurse Practitioner (NP) to help navigate a middle schooler who thought they may be pregnant and were worried about the outcome of telling their family. The NP met with the extremely anxious student and answered all their questions, provided educational information, and scheduled an appointment for a pregnancy test. This reduced the student's anxiety where they reported being able to attend classes instead of being consumed with anxiety. They attended their appointment for the pregnancy test and it was negative. Since the SBHC clinician and NP were working together they were able to support this student in eventually sharing this information with their family in a safe way during a family session.

In December 2022, school support staff at one of our high school locations reached out to the SBHC Nurse Practitioner (NP) with concerns regarding a student's mental health and physical wellness. The student was identified as at risk being that she is homeless, living in a shelter with an older sibling, and had limited contact and support from a legal guardian, with an active DCF case. The student had barriers as well to seeking outpatient medical and behavioral health care due to transportation. The NP was able to meet with the student to discuss any medical concerns the adolescent has been experiencing and not sought out care for, as well as completing a mental health screening and referral to SBHC counseling services and increased support from school staff. The NP also utilized agency resources and a program called "The Polar Express" to provide gift cards to the student to help her and her sister during the holiday season, which were likely utilized for basic necessities given their current circumstances. Engagement in the SBHC through an integrated approach helped this student access medical and mental health care and address needs in a consistent place in her life- her school.

I hope these few examples help persuade you of the critical impact that SBHC's have on students, families, and/or communities. CFA urges you to please not allow the almost \$429,000 proposed cut to the budget which was removed from the SBHC line item. We have asked DPH to explain the discrepancy and it is thought that this was the COLA that was allocated in previous years. With the mental health crisis what it is today, it is inexplicable how that would even be a consideration.

CFA urges the Appropriations Committee to please support this bill AND to consider adding the COLA back into the line item. It is vital to our funding as the cost of everything has increased. We want to highlight for you the failure of DPH to provide adequate COLAs to the SBHC providers over the past 20 years! If these necessary increases are not included, we will not be able to recruit and retain a qualified workforce to support our children and youth. This bill, if passed, will allow these sites to offer supports for young people such as those referenced above who can then continue to thrive and remain in school. This is critical to their future. I also ask that you consider supporting the expansion of School Based Health Centers, not only to include mental health services, but also medical services, removing many of the barriers to accessing the care our youth need. Thank you for supporting School Based Health Centers.

Respectfully submitted,

Allison Blake, CEO
Child and Family Agency of SECT